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The Early Poetry of the Gunpowder Plot: Myth in the Making

J ohn Milton is the best-known teenage poet of the Gunpowder
Plot, although he is not the first. His Latin poems relating to
the Plot, especially "In Quintum Novembris," have sometimes
been approached as a preparatory study, a "wellspring of the later
heroic poetry," not just because of such motifs as the infernal council
and the use of gunpowder but also in the poem's theatrical effects and
conception of the Satanic.[1] Narrative details are slight. The only
plotter actually named is "perfidious Fawkes" of the first epigram.[2]
But by then—over twenty years after the event, if Milton wrote his
poems at seventeen—the name once mentioned, the story hardly
needed telling. Thus the actual narrative of "In Quintum Novem-
bris" is surprisingly abbreviated: Satan, in friar's disguise, tells the
sleeping Pope to destroy the king and nobility of Britain with gun-
powder; the Pope orders the crime; God intervenes; and to the gen-
eral joy of the kingdom the papists are sent to "painful punishments."
Since the episode of the last clause occupies only ten lines out of 226,
one finds an odd foreshortening of proportions in this narrative com-
pared with that in the first poems on the Plot, which tend to spend far
more time in England than in Hell and Rome. Elaboration, oratory,
and atmosphere rule, as with the telling of myths in such poems as
the Homeric hymns. The story is so well known it almost takes care
of itself.

We tend to think of "In Quintum Novembris" as irrelevant to

1. John G. Demaray, "Gunpowder and the Problem of Theatrical Heroic Form: In Quintum
Novembris," Milton Studies 19 (1984), 3–19 (p. 16).

2. Milton, Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis, 1957), p. 13;
quotations from Milton are from this edition.

anything except Milton's development, without asking whether its previously established tradition, especially among neo-Latin poets, might have some significance in itself. Milton's poem participates in a commemorative discourse that would endure for centuries, having been auspiciously inaugurated by the putative victim himself, James I, in his speech to Parliament on the conspiracy on November 9, 1605. Yet such genres as royal pronouncements and Guy Fawkes-Day sermons aside, one can explore the nature of this enduring anniversary from its poetic manifestations, especially those earliest ones which most fully convey the anxieties and aspirations of the moment. The argument of this essay is that if, as historians now generally believe, the government's advance knowledge of the Plot led it to engage in a degree of entrapment, the object of the "official" version or fiction that ensued was to focus the culture's hatreds and fears on one segment, even one person, in effect propelling into history a ready scapegoat for any collective failure or frustration. This collective version of the Plot was especially fostered by the priestly class of the culture—the scholars, lawyers, and clergy—without whom it probably could not have been sustained. Along the way I would like to consider whether the story can be called a "myth." A brief review of the origins of the Fawkes-Day poetic tradition will allow a vantage-point from which to consider its meaning in history.

II

In the earliest poems on the Plot the narrative particulars take on a greater importance than Milton gives them, while the story itself can sometimes curiously differ from the one Milton knew. Consider *Trayterous Percyes and Catesbyes Prosopopoeia* (1606) by the first teenage poet of the Plot, Edward Hawes, "Scholler at Westminster," according to the title page, "a youth of sixteene yeeres old." Hawes describes in six-line stanzas a dream-vision dialogue heard between "Two Monsters skulls" from hell, covered with snakes and horseflies, the heads of Thomas Percy and Robert Catesby. This version of the story tells of two arrogant, power-hungry men, offspring of illustrious old English families, who are beguiled by the Pope into plotting their crime. Neither man cares for religion: Percy, an "Atheist," wanted (like Sancho Panza) "to be a governour," while Catesby was motivated by "Envy, and blooddy rage, with hope of gayne." Both men

met their own fiery deaths in a shootout with the Sheriff of War-
wickshire and his men, and as the title-page woodcut shows (a heads-
man with an axe and butcher knife beside a lifeless body and a fire),
their corpses received the traitor's drawing and quartering, the heads
being impaled on pikes above the Parliament buildings. There Hawes
and his classmates at Westminster could see them daily—ghastly
skulls in Hawes's dream vision, and probably in his dreams, holding
infernal dialogue. Other, earlier plots came to the boy's mind, as they
did not to Milton's: first the Elizabethan treasons—the Northern
rebels, Felton, Norton, "carping Campion," Babington, Tichborne,
Parry, Lopez—then the plots against James—Gowrie, Bothwell,
Ralegh, Cobham, and Grey.[3]

In a way Hawes's story is closer to that of modern historians than to
the mythic version underlying Milton's poem, not to mention all the
other poems, sermons, and old men's tales recounted about the Plot
later in the seventeenth century. Historians now put Catesby at the
helm of the conspiracy, some thinking that Fawkes was included
because of his military experience with undermining and explosives.
They tend to see the Plot as a continuation of cabals real and imagined
throughout this era of politics and paranoia.[4] Like Hawes, they also
downplay the religious motives of at least some plotters, Catesby and
Percy included. It is not at all certain that young Hawes would have
understood why November Fifth is named for Guy Fawkes, since he
never mentions Fawkes in his poem. Although an adolescent piece
and not artful verse, the poem does testify to an early viewpoint about
the event, one circulating at Westminster during the spring of 1606
before the myth of November Fifth had taken shape. Other writers,
especially those of later decades, would differ especially in making
Fawkes the main plotter, in removing the Plot from its historical
antecedents, and in depicting the plotters as religious fanatics, crea-
tures of the Jesuits.

The very earliest book of poetry about the Plot is understandably
vague on historical details, being dated November 15, 1605, only

3. Edward Hawes, *Trayterous Percyes and Catesbyes Prosopopeia* (1606), sigs. B3v, B4, C3v,
C2–C2v.

4. On Fawkes see C. Northcote Parkinson, *Gunpowder, Treason and Plot* (London, 1976),
p. 49. He discusses the Elizabethan background pp. 7–10, on which see also Lacey Baldwin
Smith, *Treason in Tudor England: Politics and Paranoia* (Princeton, 1986).

three days after the shooting of Catesby and Percy: this is the Cambridge scholar Thomas Goad's *Cithara Octochorda Pectine Pulsata*—a long cento or pastiche of Horatian lines, several of which address Fawkes, whose name is punned with *fallax* or false. A similar pun runs through Francis Herring's *Pietas Pontificia* (1606) where Fawkes is "Falsus" throughout. Punning scornfully on someone's name, a time-honored method of the poetry of abuse, is the chief device of the unknown poet Richard Williams in *Acclamatio Patrie,* which the author claims to have written immediately on hearing of the Plot. Unable to afford a printer, says Williams in a preface, he had a few manuscript copies made, giving one to Prince Henry some time later. Most of Williams' stanzas joke with the conspirators' names: Catesby is a cat, a "filthie scratchinge beaste"; Digby "Digged a pitt, and hym selfe fell in"; Robert Winter destroyed spring, and so on.[5] Williams got one name wrong, however, as Guy Fawkes is called "Vaux." He had apparently confused the name with that of the Vaux family, including Anne Vaux, one of England's most prominent Catholic families. Lady Anne had sheltered Henry Garnet and other Jesuits on her country estates. Confusion of the names was a natural mistake if one thought of all Catholics in league together. The same error occurs in the June 1606 transcript of the Star Chambers' examination of the Earl of Northumberland, where Fawkes is Vaux throughout.[6]

But the most influential of all the early poems is surely Herring's *Pietas Pontificia.* This Latin poem saw an expanded edition, an English translation by A. P. in 1610, and another translation by John Vicars in 1615. It opens with an image of Guy Fawkes as a serpent born in hell from the union of Lucifer and the great whore. Here is a striking instance of the way in which a literary work can participate in a myth at odds with historical fact, almost from the first moment of the event. A decade later Herring's translator Vicars felt obliged to insert a note at this point: "Fawkes is not heere first mentioned as the Prime

5. Richard Williams, *Acclamatio Patriae* in his *A Poore Mans Pittance,* ed. F. J. Furnivall. *Ballads from Manuscripts,* vol. 2 (London, 1868), pp. 39, 24–31, 43–46. This edition, from Arundel MS 418, also contains Williams' poems on the Babington and Essex plots.

6. Mark Nicholls, "The 'Wizard Earl' in Star Chamber: The Trial of the Earl of Northumberland, June 1606," *Historical Journal* 30 (1987), 173–89. The spelling is still used in 1756, in a caricature of Henry Fox as "Guy Vaux the 2d." See M. Dorothy George, *English Political Caricature to 1792* (Oxford, 1959), plate 29a.

Author, but because hee was so inhumane as to be the fatall actor, for
Catesby (as afterward is shewen) was the first Author of the Powder-
Treason."[7] B. N. DeLuna, in his book showing Jonson's *Cataline* to be
a play about the Plot, writes: "Though Catesby was universally
acknowledged to be the 'instigator,' 'guiding spirit,' and 'soul' of the
Gunpowder conspiracy, and Guy Fawkes a mere hireling, through a
curious series of historical accidents the latter is popularly credited
with having led the conspirators, while Catesby's name is known
only to specialists."[8] By what "curious series of historical accidents"
Fawkes took this rap neither DeLuna nor any other historian has
shown, although a theory will be proposed shortly.

In the eleven years between Herring's first version and Vicars'
translation, *Pietas Pontificia* grew from twenty pages of Latin hexame-
ters to 100 pages of English verse, replete with prefaces, notes, mis-
cellaneous poems on Prince Henry, Queen Elizabeth, and the Jesuits,
and commendatory verses from Joshua Sylvester, Nathaniel Cham-
bers of Gray's Inn, and six others, several of whom seem to credit
Vicars as author, not just translator. Some of the expansion came
from Herring's own second version, but the difference between Her-
ring's first version and Vicars speaks volumes about the course the
story had taken in the interim. Vicars perpetuates some of the more
fanciful details of the story; but knowing more than Herring did
about the actual events, he muddles the neat outlines of Herring's
story. As noted in the previous paragraph, he knew that Catesby was
the real ringleader, but he had to accede somewhat to the by-then-
established idea that Fawkes was the chief plotter. In Herring, Fawkes
gathers his conspirators and travels to Rome and Austria for instruc-
tions, an episode that takes a little over a page (sigs. A3v–A4). Vicars
(pp. 8–22) adds that Providence had favored Elizabeth over Spain
during the plots against her, and had continued to show favor by
putting James on the throne. Spain rejects Catesby's plea for aid
because she has acquiesced in the new King's peace overtures, so
Catesby is forced to propose his own diabolically inspired scheme

7. Herring, *Mischeefes Mysterie: or, Treasons Masterpeece, the Powder-Plot*, tr. John Vicars
(1617), p. 5. Herring's second ed. of *Pietas Pontificia* (1609) is virtually the same as 1606 in this
"first part," adding a very few lines in amplification and changing some words. The new
"second part" in 1609, entitled "Venatio Catholica," is mainly about Digby, Catesby, and the
other plotters in the Midlands, although Fawkes remains much in the reader's eye.

8. B. N. DeLuna, *Jonson's Romish Plot* (Oxford, 1967), p. 180.

offering fame in Rome as the plotters' reward. Fawkes (who in Herring initiates the plan) speaks to second the idea; Father Gerard administers an oath of secrecy and the eucharist; and Father Garnet, "Baals Priest" (p. 19), advises them that they will not be responsible for the deaths of innocent victims in the explosion. Vicars adds an attack on the highest-ranking plotter, Sir Everard Digby (pp. 24–25, not in Herring, sig. B1), and an account of the institutions—church, crown, records and charters—that would have been lost (pp. 27–29). Most of the last half of his poem is a long prayer of thanks, laced with that peculiar blend of self-congratulation and self-loathing favored in the contemporary pulpit.

At about the same time as Herring, Michael Wallace, a countryman of King James, produced his own brief epic of the Plot, *In Serenissimi Regis Jacobi . . . Liberationem* (1606). That the author was professor of philosophy at Glasgow, where he had received his M.A. in 1601,[9] calls to mind the notable point that Goad, Herring, Vicars, and Wallace, not to mention Milton, contributed to the making of this story not as hack tale-tellers but as members of the intellectual community. All four of the early poets obviously hoped for some gain from their encomia. Herring, Doctor of Medicine and a member of the London College of Medicine, had greeted James's accession with a poem *In Foelicissimum Jacobi . . . Ingressum* (entered April 11, 1603). Vicars writes in a preface that he was raised as an orphan at Christ's Hospital, where, after an Oxford education, he returned to teach as an usher.

Like Herring, Wallace puts Fawkes, not Catesby, at the center of things. Following a council in hell, the devils send a Jesuit to implant the gunpowder scheme in Fawkes's head (pp. 8–10). The next five pages follow the official version of history fairly well, with Percy the only other named conspirator (p. 14). The last two pages are occupied with the inevitable prayer of thanks and praise of James. Instead of the merely ambitious plotters of the Westminster schoolboy, Wallace depicts a fanatical Fawkes motivated by "relligionis amore / Romanae" (p. 14) who thinks the Pope will build altars to him (pp. 10–11). The poem does mention previous plots against James, but there is no awareness of the Elizabethan antecedents to November Fifth.

9. In *Musae Anglicanae* (New York, 1940), pp. 70–71, Leicester Bradner discusses Wallace, Herring, and Phineas Fletcher in relation to Milton.

John Ross's *Apostrophe and Praesens Tempus* is a 439-line poem concluding a book of Latin verses on the kings in Geoffrey of Monmouth, published at Frankfurt in 1607 but written before December 1606.[10] Ross was a lawyer at the Inner Temple, seemingly well-regarded in the society. Evidence indicates that he knew and was perhaps a legal factotum for the most distinguished Templar made famous by the Plot, Sir Edward Coke, ruthless prosecutor of the offenders as the King's attorney general. In Ross's poem the incipient myth of Fawkes mingles with the historical event. The shade of Cadwallader, last king of the Britons, emerges from the underworld to tell the nymph Alethia (Truth) of a wonder he has seen. A living mortal has somehow found his way into hell—Catesby, as it turns out—to seek aid in the Plot: "a man of pale countenance, hair down to his shoulders, uneven teeth, unusually thin-bearded, body tall yet slender, promising its strength not in itself but in the use of arms. . . . one not readily inclined to speak, yet bold." In its specificity, no portrait of this kind appears in any of these early poems, leading to the belief that Ross may have been closer to the events than any other poet except Jonson. As for Fawkes, Ross describes him more as a presence than a person. After his capture, "he came to court to be gazed at like a monster; . . . he never changed his expression but was the same toward everyone wherever he went. . . . He was so brazen-faced, iron-willed, and adamant-hearted that he would not soften in any way, nor could anyone goad him out of his alarming boldness." Far more than Catesby or Father Garnet, whom Ross presents as the mastermind of the trio, Fawkes is an unearthly monster, a monster unworthy of human compassion.[11]

While Hawes, too, had converted Percy and Catesby into monstrous skulls, he had presented the two as human, with motives, personal histories, even souls. The depersonalizing of Fawkes marks a significant move in the history of November Fifth. Thus the eminent

10. John Ross, *Britannica, sive de Regibus Veteris Britanniae* (Frankfurt, 1607), pp. 70–85. On Ross see my ed., John Ross, *Poems on Events of the Day 1582–1607* (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1991).

11. "Vir pallidus ore, / Crinibus in dorsum dimissis, lumine acuto, / Dentibus imparibus, barba pro tempore rara, / Corpore procero, gracili tamen, ut quod ad arma / Non, quantas habuit vires, promitteret in se. / . . . minime promptus sermonis, at audax" (pp. 72–73). "Tunc veluti monstrum spectatu venit ad Aulam: . . . / Non variat vultum: sed ubique, ac omnibus idem . . . / . . . huic aenea frons est, / Ferrea mens, & cor adamantinum, ut hunc nihil horum / Molliat, aut trepidis quicquam compungat ab ausis" (pp. 76–77).

Latin poet William Gager writes in 1608 of Fawkes as dehumanized, "hardened with iron and rock, now threatening horrors and almost breathing fire from his eyes and jaws." Dehumanizing thus meant demonizing him as the "cacodaemona cellae" (Herring) or "the devil of the vault," to use the title of I. H.'s (perhaps John Heath's) even earlier 1606 English poem.[12] That poem, entered January 3, 1606, even before the plotters came to trial, envisions as does Ross the carnage and civil war that would have taken place had not Catesby and Percy, "hels blacke fiends" (sig. D1), been thwarted. These two plotters are named first and blamed foremost, just as in Hawes. What is more startling, Fawkes appears nowhere in this text. Yet by the end of the month a report of the execution of Fawkes and three other plotters at Westminster could single him out as "the great Devill of all," observing that "had hee not beene a Devill incarnate, he had never conceived so villanous a thought, nor beene employed in so damnable an action."[13] This would become the dominant note. A. P.'s translation of Herring in 1610 (not quite as fulsome as Vicars' later version) enlarges the hint in Herring's Latin, making Fawkes a Grendel-like figure: "Mans name's too good, for he deserves not it, / But Divell should I call this hellish weed, / Night walking goblin, master of his skill."[14] By 1610 we are well on the way to the fictive creature Guy Fawkes.

This depersonalizing or demonizing is concocted within the crucible of mob hatred. T. W. describes how Fawkes was so weakened and crippled after being worked over by the torturers that he had to be carried to his cruel execution on a litter, dying "to the great joy of the beholders" (sig. C3v). The mob's role is nicely described some years later by Thomas Campion in another Latin poem only recently published. After Sir Thomas Knevet and his searchers arrest Fawkes, writes Campion, "they lead the unnatural man, bound there and then, to the sacred palace, pouring down curses upon him, as happens when men drag a bear through the streets to the accompaniment of barking

12. William Gager, *Pyramis,* ed. and tr. C. F. Tucker Brooke. *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 32 (1936), 247–349 (p. 263); Herring, sig. B3v; I. H., *The Divell of the Vault* (1606).

13. T. W., *The Arraignment and Execution of the Late Traytours* (1606), sig. C3v.

14. Herring, *Popish Pietie,* trans. A. P. (1610), st. 48. This translation may have been occasioned by new fears after the murder of Henry IV (DeLuna, p. 34). Herring's original: "Daemon hic, (haud hominis dignabor nomine post hac) / Ambulo nocturnus, fraudis scelerisque Magister / Horribilis" (sig. B1).

dogs and a crowd of common people."[15] The London populace at
large was indeed stirred to a frenzy over the Plot, so that the Venetian
ambassador worried that "the mob . . . is convinced that some, if not
all, foreign Princes are at the bottom of the plot." The Privy Council
in fact deemed a proclamation necessary denying this charge, and the
Spanish ambassador appeared among the people to dispel their hos-
tility by throwing them money.[16] If, as Parkinson and some other
historians believe,[17] Salisbury chiefly instigated the Plot-story as pro-
paganda against the Catholics, such expressions of concern from his
Council must surely mean that he was as much creature as creator of
the Plot.

What is suggested at this point is a gigantic public outcry, signalling
a social crisis much deeper than one would expect from a mere failed
assassination. Young Hawes was right, as are modern historians: the
ground for this crisis had been prepared by thirty years of religiously
inspired paranoia from right, left, and center during Elizabeth's time.
But there were other hatreds than religious ones at work. From the
perpetrators' viewpoint James's nationality and supposed favor to-
ward Scotsmen fired the Plot as much as his religion, as Jenny Wor-
mald has recently shown.[18] From the mob's viewpoint, the old south-
ern hostility toward the north of England produced suspicion and
continuing harrassment of northerners, especially Yorkshiremen,
who were still being subjected to unfounded arrests for the Plot as late
as 1611.[19]

In these facts of English society lies part of the reason for the
peculiar exaltation of Fawkes above the other plotters, for Fawkes
was a Yorkshireman, a Catholic, and a veteran of Spain's army. He

15. Thomas Campion, *De Pulverea Conjuratione*, ed. and tr. David Lindley and Robin
Sowerby. Leeds Texts and Monographs, n.s. 10 (1987), p. 73. The poem is dated ca. 1615 (p. 4).
The editors refer to Campion's "dematerialization of the causes of the Plot" (p. 18) to emphasize
the demonic, a point consistent with my view of mythologizing by Herring and other early
poets.

16. DeLuna, p. 93, quoting *Calendar of State Papers Venetian*, 10.293, and Sir Richard Baker,
Chronicle, p. 131.

17. Parkinson, pp. 51–52. For the extreme version of this position, see John Gerard, S. J.,
What Was the Gunpowder Plot? (London, 1897), answered by S. R. Gardiner, *What the Gunpowder
Plot Was* (London, 1897).

18. Jenny Wormald, "Gunpowder, Treason and Scots," *Journal of British Studies* 24 (1985),
141–68, who notes that Fawkes told one Scot, in the King's presence, that "his intent was to
have blown them back into Scotland" (p. 161).

19. DeLuna, p. 66, n. 99, quoting John Chamberlain's *Letters* for November that year.

even fought against his own countrymen in the Battle of Nieuport
and the Siege of Calais. Thomas Percy was also a northerner, but as all
the poets observe he descended from a famous and noble family, as
did Catesby himself, who hailed from the Midlands. And if it seemed
irreverent to defame the old names of Catesby and Percy, it was
certainly amiss to degrade the highest-ranking offender Sir Everard
Digby. Although Digby endured a vicious prosecution at the hands of
Coke and met a traitor's death like Fawkes, his name receives selective
treatment from the poets. Ross does not mention him at all, perhaps
because he was a friend to the Digby family.[20] Vicars' translation
paints a black picture of Digby as providing most of the financial
backing (pp. 24–25), but if we look for this detail in Herring's original
poem, we will not even find Digby's name. His alleged plan to kidnap
the Princess Elizabeth in the country receives detailed treatment in
Vicars and Campion, but Gager and Hawes do not mention Digby at
all. DeLuna also finds Digby's Roman counterpart missing from
Cataline, probably out of Jonson's friendship for Digby (p. 242). It is
remarkable, to say the least, that the only titled member of the cabal
receives so little attention in these poems.

III

The facts so far presented lend themselves to analysis in the light of
contemporary ideas on the relationship between violence in commu-
nities and surrogate victimage or the making of scapegoats. Thought
on this subject has traversed light years since Frazer's *Golden Bough,*
now a century old, and the still-earlier work of Wilhelm Mannhardt
on which Frazer based his theories. During the heyday of Frazer-
influenced criticism the double meaning of the Greek *pharmakon* as
remedy and *pharmakos* as scapegoat was well known, and determined
many a reading of Greek and Shakespearean tragedy.[21] Most discus-
sion on the subject locates scapegoating within the context of social
concern. While rejecting Frazer's ideas on annual king-sacrifice and
the origin of scapegoating in vegetation myths and rituals, Walter
Burkert finds a uniform pattern of surrogate victimage to counter

20. Ross's 1607 will (P.R.O. Prob II/110) mentions "Lady Digby" as one of several recip-
ients of a memorial ring.
21. See Michael Hinden, "Ritual and Tragic Action: A Synthesis of Current Theory," *Journal
of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 32 (1974), 357–73.

such threats as plague or crop-failure. To begin with, the victim is usually selected from the marginalized, the outcasts of the community. He may well be, as Fawkes seems to have been, an ill-tempered and unpleasant person. Burkert observes that "The 'leading away' of a victim in situations of anxiety, threatened by famine, plague, sin, or real enemies, is thus a ritual, a meaningful action pattern of driving out and abandoning, guided by aboriginal experience."[22] Anyone familiar with the trial and execution of Fawkes—or any capital criminal then—knows how much ritualism attended on the event. But since there is little doubt that authorities had prior knowledge of the Plot, what sets Fawkes apart from the usual criminal in this respect was his and his companions' selection in advance, as it were, of the actual crime. Fawkes was then chosen a second time, by history— singled out from among the other leading conspirators as a result of a collective decision made over several years, so that the "Day" became his alone; and it is with this second-level process that we are chiefly concerned.

The scapegoat has received somewhat different treatment from Burkert's in the recent work of René Girard, whose work is centrally concerned with this one topic of the scapegoat, especially in his *Violence and the Sacred* and *The Scapegoat*.[23] If, as modern historians have believed, much of the Gunpowder Plot story was fabricated by the Earl of Salisbury to discredit English Catholics, then Guy Fawkes would fit neatly into Girard's concept of the victim as innocent outsider chosen less by a unanimous community than by hostile factions within it so as to release some of the pressure of their social conflicts.[24] For centuries after his death old Guy continued to be denounced in churches and burned in effigy as part of the national celebration, if not the national neurosis. No wonder that in 1641, when great new energies were erupting, Vicars and Herring's poem saw yet another edition (as *The Quintessence of Cruelty*). Caroline Hibbard has shown how the Dean of Manchester, Richard Heyricke, used his Gunpowder

22. Walter Burkert, *Structures and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1979), pp. 63–75 (quotation, p. 72).

23. In addition to Gerard (n. 17, above), see Christopher Devlin, "The Gunpowder Plot," in *Hamlet's Divinity and Other Essays,* intro. C. V. Wedgwood (Carbondale, Ill., 1963), pp. 141–57. Devlin proposes that the plot aimed only to blow up the Painted Chamber with a single keg of powder brought from Percy House.

24. Carol Z. Wiener, "The Beleaguered Isle: A Study of Elizabethan and Early Jacobean Anti-Catholicism," *Past and Present,* 51 (1971): 27–62 (pp. 28–29).

Day sermons in the late 1630s to whip up fear of court Catholicism.[25]
Thomas Barlow's compendium *The Gunpowder Treason* (1679) came
on the heels of the spurious "Popish Plot," in an atmosphere (now
charged with such new rivalries as that between Whigs and Tories)
very near to lynch-mob fury. The closeness of this tradition to surro-
gate victimage is indicated as late as 1850 (an era of still other conflicts:
high vs. low church, rural vs. urban) with the burning in effigy of
Cardinal Wiseman on November 5, 1850.[26]

However it might be characterized, most people agree that
Fawkes's handling by the myth-makers was at least in excess of the
circumstances. But in what sense is the story really a myth? At the
root of all myths, Girard believes, lies some variant of the universal
human pattern of generative violence, social crisis, and surrogate
victimage. The strange blend in the man Fawkes of enormity and
nonentity corresponds to the double nature of Girard's scapegoats,
who are chosen because they are like us but are also our monstrous
doubles (in the gods, says Girard, this dual nature is seen in the
paradox of Zeus the merciful and Zeus the thunderer, Dionysos the
loving and Dionysos the terrible).[27] Although not really *innocent*,
Fawkes shares with Girard's scapegoats the like-unlike dual nature: he
looks like any other Englishman, with an English family, education,
and tongue; but he is alien in being Catholic and a Yorkshireman and a
soldier with the Spanish. He is in fact almost a national alien, first in
that he had not set foot in England for twelve years before returning
in 1604, second in the odd and unexplained Italianizing of his name to
Guido, which shows up frequently in the early Plot-literature.[28] It
was his excessive difference, then, his "semiotic excess," in Masao
Yamaguchi's phrase, that especially promoted his selection.[29]

At this point, in view of the spotty record of literary scholars
engaging anthropological ideas, it must be asked whether it is really

25. Caroline M. Hibbard, *Charles I and the Popish Plot* (Chapel Hill, 1983), pp. 145–46.

26. Joel Hurstfield, "Gunpowder Plot and the Politics of Dissent," in *Early Stuart Studies: Essays in Honor of David Harris Willson,* ed. Howard Reinmuth (Minneapolis, 1970), p. 117.

27. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred,* tr. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, 1977), p. 251.

28. "Guido" appears in the very early *Cithara* of Goad (sig. D4), Wallace (p. 14), and Vicars (p. 38).

29. Masao Yamaguchi, "Towards a Poetics of the Scapegoat," in Paul Dumouchel, ed., *Violence and Truth: On the Work of René Girard* (Stanford, 1988), 179–91: "The community's continual existence requires scapegoats; while the scapegoat, whether consciously or not, continues to provoke the community through semiotic excess" (p. 188).

correct, when dealing with a literate culture on the verge of industrialization, to speak of its cultural narratives as myths? For one thing, it can be observed that for all we know, "original" myths in oral cultures may well be created from experience with such people as Fawkes— loners, misfits, outsiders, disposable members of the community.[30] And from the standpoint of almost anyone's definition, the story certainly has mythic trappings (besides Fawkes's demonic qualities, there are James's divine ones, and the apocalyptic threatened end), even though most anthropologists would still deny that so scribal and historical a fiction is mythic. But if we may suspend our semantic concerns for a moment, it is revealing to look at a set of myth-characteristics developed by Philippe Selliers, based on Dumézil, Eliade, Lévi-Strauss, and Vernant, that allows us to see just how close the story does come to myth.[31] (1) The story certainly holds the status of *foundation-narrative,* becoming for the next three centuries the archetypal anti-Catholic charter, even though, as we have seen, some of the early writers saw the event as part of a long series of plots. (2) This story is not exactly *anonymous and collective in origin,* for in a print-culture a metamorphosis into myth is always prevented or retarded by the presence of supposedly exact original accounts always available to challenge the elaborations of the collective imagination. Still, the mysterious ascendancy of Fawkes to center stage has much of mythic anonymity about it. (3) That the story has a *socio-religious function* has never been doubted, and (4) it has been *held as true* by most Englishmen. (5) If in myths the characters are *deprived of any psychological dimension,* the depersonalizing and demonizing of Fawkes surely answers this criterion.

(6) A final requisite is that the narrative *lacks the effect of the real.* On the one hand, the Plot story seems every bit as fancifully apocalyptic as any flood-myth, but on the other, it was precisely the new possibility of this kind of apocalypse that brought genuine shudders to most observers. The unidentified transcriber of Northumberland's examination writes: "And although this devellish devise (as yt should

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30. See Hans Mayer, *Outsiders: A Study in Life and Letters,* tr. Denis M. Sweet (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).

31. Philippe Sellier, "Recits mythiques et productions litteraires," in *Mythes, images, représentations,* ed. Jean-Marie Grassin, *Travaux et Mémoires de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Limoges* (Paris, 1977), pp. 61–70 (for characteristics listed, see pp. 62–64).

have beene executed) cannot bee parollelled by anie example of for-
mer times, and doth likewise so farr exceede the common conceipt of
this present age that notwithstandinge all the cleere and apparaunte
demonstrations that have been made heere of[,] yt is not yet gener-
all[y] beleeved in forreine nations, that ever anie such hellish practize
was ever devised or purposed" (p. 178). The very unbelievability of
the story heightened the fear and fury of the mob at the same time as it
invalidated the story for more thoughtful (and less engaged) persons.
But the unreality of the story is for the poets subsumed in its utter
horror. Richard Williams draws a contrast between the Babington
Plot, which would have killed only the Queen, and this, which would
have wiped out the entire government and the cream of the ruling
class. "Age, rank, or sex was not to be spared," writes John Ross,
"Nemesis was to rage everywhere in the flames." For Herring this
was the "presentis Dedecus aevi," in Vicars' words, "Disgrace of this
and of all age hereafter."[32]

Among Vicars' many additions to his translation of Herring is a
digression on the sheer uniqueness of the event—charged, like its
perpetrator, with "semiotic excess"—by providing six reasons for
this uniqueness.[33] One is that the Plot was designed to be undiscover-
able, so that its detection by Salisbury and the King proved all the
more miraculous. Vicars' other five reasons are all variants on the
same point: the plotters used gunpowder, not hired killers; the vic-
tims would have no chance to plead for mercy; the agency of the
killing is inanimate; fire is the most all-devouring element; and fire
inflicts the worst suffering. In other words, the Plot was an imper-
sonal, anonymous act of ultimate destruction. The culture had no
experience with anything like it, this thought that in a flash the flower
of a nation could be wiped out. Above the plotters' cellar, a building
containing all ranks of people from King to servant would collapse in
fire; people of name and no name would die at the hand of a man of no
name. Gunpowder, the great leveller on the late medieval battlefield,
would bring indiscriminate death to Westminster. No wonder Milton
writes in his epigram on the inventor of gunpowder that this wizard
was greater than Prometheus, who brought only fire.

32. Williams, p. 56; Ross, p. 81 ("non parcitur aetas / Non genus, aut sexus, / Nemesis furit
undique flammis"); Herring, sig. B4; Vicars, p. 40.
33. Vicars, pp. 40–42. James himself made the same six points in his speech to Parliament
after the plot: see *His Majesties Speach in This Last Session of Parliament* (1605), sigs. B2–B3.

IV

Comparing Milton's poetry with these early poems on the Plot, one could easily construct an argument that both Milton and Phineas Fletcher, his formerly-assumed source, go back for their "inspiration" to such neo-Latin progenitors as Herring and Ross. Yet Fletcher's *Locustae, vel Pietas Jesuitica* is now itself usually dismissed as a source for Milton.[34] Written as early as 1611, the poem went unpublished until a year after Milton wrote his Latin verses on the Plot, and it has always seemed a little unlikely to have Milton rummaging around in Fletcher's manuscripts looking for ideas. If Hanford and Tillyard could readily accept this connection, there were others who pointed out features that both Milton and Fletcher shared with their precedessors. In 1939 Tucker Brooke reported coincidence of details between their two poems and a Latin one seemingly of the 1580s, *Paraeus,* on the Elizabethan plotter Doctor Parry. Parry is suborned by a cardinal sent from the Pope, whose idea for assassinating the Queen came from Pluto or Satan.

Resemblances worth noting—if only because they have never been noted—do exist between the poems I have discussed and Milton's work, especially *Paradise Lost.* The unholy trinity of Satan, Sin, and Death correspond to the union between Lucifer and the "purple strumpet," the Catholic Church, begetting a monstrous serpent in the "thick darkness and caverns of hell."[35] The strumpet's speech to her son suggests a Trinity-parody (cf. *PL* 2.727): "My only hope is in you, who know my thoughts and the precepts of the Father" ("In Te spes sola est, Patris documenta, measque / Tu calles omnes Rationes," sig. A2v). The comment on Satan's disguise in deceiving Uriel (*PL* 3.681) is not unlike what Herring (in Vicars' translation) says about Fawkes's use of clerical attire: "A Priest-like habite shapes his best disguise: / And marvell not, for thus the Divell doth use, / Like Angell bright Gods people to abuse" (5). ("Mystam simulans, (Cacodemonis iste / Mos vetus, ut Lucis fallat vestitus amictu / Tectius" [sig. A3]). Hellish councils abound in these plot-poems, and Vicars

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34. See commentary on the poem in *A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton,* Vol. I, ed. Douglas Bush (New York, 1970), esp. pp. 169–71, from which information in the next three sentences is taken.

35. Translating "Purpureum . . . Scortum" and "densis tenebris, Erebi Cavernis" in Herring, *Pietas Pontificia* (1606), sig. A2. Bracketed Latin passages, with folio numbers, are from this edition.

considerably elaborates the meeting of Catesby, Fawkes, and the others to a point of resemblance with Milton's episode. The Belial-like Father Garnet ("Baal's priest," [Vicars, p. 19]), praised for his gravity and learning, assures Catesby that the plotters will not be morally responsible for the deaths of the innocent in the explosion. Quite a few Milton-like passages also show up in Michael Wallace, whose Abaddon, in that council scene, sounds like Moloch, Milton's "horrid king" (*PL* 1.392): "horrid with savage fury, whose heart was set on dire war, rage, conspiracies and harmful crimes" ("Horridus immani rabie, cui tristia bella, / Iraeque, insidiaeque, & crimina noxia cordi").[36] In this poem Satan uses "Tonans" (pp. 5, 6) as a periphrasis for God like Milton's "Thunderer" (2.27). It goes without saying, finally, that Raphael's outcry at the diabolic invention of gunpowder during the battle in heaven echoes, consciously or otherwise, the shock over the horrific novelty of terrorism with explosives in the Jacobean era.

Some similarities of course hark back to earlier, especially classical, poems and their progeny. The plot from hell appears in such European epics as Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* and Vida's *Christiad,* all of which went back to Vergil. "A history of the literary reaction to the Gunpowder Plot is yet to be written," we are told, but if it were we would find that "this body of writing employed a narrow range of imagery, tone, and authorial stance."[37] This narrowness results in part from the singleness of prototype, for no poet celebrating a momentous event in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries could let his thoughts wander far from the example of Vergil. Poems on the fates of kingdoms drew their ruling images and motifs from the *Aeneid.* If the momentous event is the Gunpowder Plot, let there be epic machinery—a council of gods favorable and malign. Let there be eloquent speeches by the principals of both spiritual factions. Let there be

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36. Wallace, *In Serenissimi Regis . . . Liberationem* (1606), p. 6. "Horridus" means "bristling," of course, but perhaps Wallace, like Milton, is thinking of both senses. Another interesting coincidence is Milton's description of the crowd of devils after Mammon's speech (*PL* 2.284–87) and that by Wallace after Satan's speech: "But there was an uncertain murmur in the crowd, as rocks resist swift waves in an enclosed rush of water" (At vulgi incertum murmur, ceu gurgite clauso, / Saxa obstant fluviis rapidis" [6]). Both owe something to *Aeneid* 11.298, but both occur at the same kind of moment.

37. John N. Wall, Jr., and Terry Bunce Burgin, " 'This Sermon . . . upon the Gun-powder Day': The Book of Homilies of 1547 and Donne's Sermon in Commemoration of Guy Fawkes' Day, 1622," *South Atlantic Review* 49.2 (1984), 19–30.

scene-painting of the two warring *loci* on earth, Rome and England. Let messages come from Satan and God in dreams or on the wings of angels. Let there be a portrait of the monster-villain (perhaps dredging up the underworld imagery of the *Aeneid*), an account of his downfall, a tribute to the victorious earthly king and his divine Protector.[38]

Yet Olympian Vergil performs the ethical shading far more subtly than his Renaissance epic followers, not to mention the sub-epic poets considered here. A strong sense of the adversarial marks both *Jerusalem Delivered* and *Paradise Lost*. Aeneas' opponents, momentary characters like Pyrrhus aside, are psychologically intelligible, even sympathetic figures, so that Selliers' criteria regarding verisimilitude and characterization remove this epic as a whole from the pale of myth. Juno is no monster, nor is Turnus, nor, certainly, Dido. As the light from Troy falls on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it casts far deeper shadows than it had in Rome. The underworld has been reduced to hell, the infernal episode being moved from the center to the beginning of the poem as if to heighten the stark moral oppositions in the epics. Tasso says that from his fourth canto (of twenty), containing the council in hell, all the other episodes are derived as if from a fountain.[39] Milton might have said something similar about the early books of an epic in which good seems to follow evil's lead. Nothing could be farther from the serene Vergil than this ethical dualism, even sensationalism.

Burkert and Girard remind us that moments of social anxiety especially intensify the hunt for scapegoats. Because the epics of Tasso and Milton bracket the period widely debated as the "crisis in Europe," a time of change that brought widespread uncertainty and suffering in central and western Europe,[40] it is tempting to ascribe the demon-haunted atmosphere of these epics to the era's intensification of ideological conflicts: libertarian humanism versus Counter-Reformation orthodoxy; Protestantism versus Catholicism; Islam versus Christianity (almost a century after Lepanto, Islam still looms

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38. Many instances of Vergilian influence are recorded in Macon Cheek, "Milton's 'In quintum Novembris': An Epic Foreshadowing," *Studies in Philology* 54 (1957), 172–84.

39. Letter of 1576 to Orazio Cappone, Tasso, *Prose*, ed. E. Mazzali (Milan, 1959), p. 800.

40. Signal essays appear in *Crisis in Europe 1560–1660*, ed. Trevor Aston (London, 1965), and crisis-analysis continues in, e.g., Theodore K. Rabb, *The Struggle for Stability in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1975), and Perez Zagorin, *Rebels and Rulers, 1500–1660*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Eng., 1982).

large in Milton's imagery of hell). The local paranoia of plot-poets, then, may be interpreted as a contamination of Vergilian epic consistent with what was happening to the fully-developed genre in a civilization abnormally riven with strife. By the late 1620s people had thoroughly ingested and reconstructed the sometimes abortive notions of earlier poets grappling with this horror. The story of the Plot from Hell could by then even be called a cliché. The "machinery" of poems on this subject, the spectacle so well described as anticipating that of *Paradise Lost,* is inseparable from the Satanic presence. It remained for the older Milton to look more deeply into the myth and refashion it along universal lines.[41]

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